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RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 8843  
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RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 3071  
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SUBJECT: STAFFDEL AHUJA BRIEFED ON HUMANITARIAN SITUATION  
IN THE NORTH AND PROGRESS ON CHILD SOLDIERS

Ref: (A) Colombo 1102, (B) Colombo 1071, (C) Colombo 985

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1. (U) SUMMARY: During her December 11-16 visit, House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) staff member Jasmeet Ahuja met with Government of Sri Lanka, NGO, UN, and international organization representatives to assess the humanitarian situation in the North. Humanitarian access issues for the UN and NGOs remain a serious concern. Through UN and GSL convoys into the North, the basic food needs of internally displaced persons (IDPs) are being met, but the delivery of non-food relief items is being hampered by the GSL. A recent agreement with the GSL to utilize the remaining NGO local staff in the Vanni to deliver and monitor humanitarian assistance is a small step in the right direction; however, the GSL continues its negative approach to NGOs through taxation, visa restrictions and public criticism. During a trip to Vavuniya, Ahuja was briefed on high levels of paramilitary violence and visited a makeshift IDP camp. In Colombo, GSL officials assured Ahuja that the TMVP would follow through on their pledges to give up the use of child soldiers completely.  
End Summary

Government Pressure Mounts on NGOs  
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2. (SBU) On December 11, NGO representative briefed HFAC staffer Jasmeet Ahuja on humanitarian issues in the North and the increasing pressure the government is placing on their operations. NGO representatives explained how their quick exit from the Vanni following a Ministry of Defense directive had forced them to leave behind equipment. The government and nationalist media outlets have spun this as a concerted effort by the NGOs to assist the LTTE. NGO reps reported that rather than forcing them to leave the country and then incurring bad publicity the government was engaged in a more subtle effort to impede and undermine their work in the country. As an example, one NGO reported that the government had attempted to

withdraw money from their bank account without their prior approval to pay back taxes. (Note: We are investigating these reports and the legal grounds for such moves and will likely raise it with the government at the next CCHA meeting in January. End Note) Ambassador sympathized with the NGO representatives and encouraged those present to be more proactive with public outreach campaigns, suggesting that most Sri Lankans were unaware of the considerable amount of NGO work that is done outside the conflict-affected North and East.

¶3. (SBU) Despite tension at the national level, NGO representatives praised the low-profile but effective collaboration between their Vanni-resident local staff - now known officially as "volunteers" - and the two Government Agents (GAs) in Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu, districts that are still at least partially under LTTE control. In September, when expatriate NGO and UN staff were ordered out of the Vanni, only non-Vanni resident Sri Lankan staff members were allowed to leave. The majority of Sri Lankan NGO staff remained in the Vanni. An agreement has been worked out between the GSL and the NGOs allowing these local staff members to continue their humanitarian relief activities with the blessing and loose supervision of the GAs, organizing themselves by sector (water-sanitation, shelter, food, education, etc.) The "volunteers" have access to communication facilities so that there is some information flowing out on the situation in the Vanni and whether food is reaching the people in need. According to the NGOs, the GAs publicly adhere to Ministry of Defense instructions not to ask NGOs for support, but privately - for example, after the recent flooding - the NGOs are the first place the GAs look to for help. In a separate meeting with Ahuja, Presidential Advisor Basil Rajapaksa, stated that the reason the Vanni-resident staff are now known as "volunteers" -- i.e. civilians without official connections to their former employers -- is to avoid a repeat of the mid-2006 killing of ACF aid workers during ongoing hostilities in Muttur.

¶4. (U) NGO representative noted that water and sanitation supplies and fuel were critical needs for the informal humanitarian

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assistance volunteer network attached to the GA offices in the Vanni.

#### Vavuniya Plagued by Paramilitary Violence

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¶5. (SBU) During a visit to Vavuniya on December 12-13, Ahuja was briefed on the impunity with which paramilitaries operate in the region. As an example, contacts in the region told Ahuja that just days prior to her arrival an elderly woman was killed with an axe in front of her family at home approximately 200 meters from a Sri Lanka Army post outside of Vavuniya town. Four unidentified masked men had called her by name at the door, yet at the time of Ahuja's visit no one had been arrested for the crime.

¶6. (SBU) According to reliable sources, since October 1, 88 cases of disappearances and 22 abductions have been reported to the Human Rights Commission in Vavuniya. During Ahuja's visit, doctors at Vavuniya's hospital continued their strike of several days, reportedly to protest extortion demands made by the paramilitaries.

#### GSL Ill-Prepared for Large IDP Inflows

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¶7. (SBU) Embassy contacts in Vavuniya told Ahuja that international organizations lack systematic access to the screening process for IDPs entering GSL-controlled Vavuniya from the Vanni. Reports indicate that 421 IDPs were processed at Omathai in late November after their villages were overrun by the ongoing Sri Lanka Army operations in northern Vavuniya. These IDPs are now being housed temporarily in three Government-administered sites in Nellukulam and Menik Farm.

¶8. (SBU) During her visit to one of the two temporary Menik Farm sites, a public school building, IDPs who were living in classrooms

cleared of desks reported to Ahuja that they had wanted to leave the Vanni and that they felt more secure at Menik Farm, although they hoped to be allowed to move in with families or friends in the area. Meanwhile, the temporary shelters the GA has committed to constructing on 60 acres of nearby land have not been completed. Aside from crowding - up to 25 persons sleeping in a classroom - living conditions at the site were reported to be adequate: the GSL provided three cooked meals per day, IDPs had access to portable toilets and outdoor bathing facilities, and access to medical care was provided on site twice a week and through transport to a nearby hospital for more complicated cases. No protection issues were raised, although IDPs might have been reluctant to do so in group interviews.

¶9. (SBU) According to reliable sources the GSL has struggled to process and house the 400+ recent arrivals and is not ready for a large-scale influx of IDPs, despite claims they will be able to handle up to 50,000 new displaced civilians.

"Emergency" But No "Crisis" in the Vanni  
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¶10. (U) Knowledgeable sources reported that the situation in the Vanni was an "emergency" but as of yet had not reached the level of a crisis; however, these same contacts expressed concern that the situation could deteriorate further. Contacts in Vavuniya told Ahuja that monitoring the distribution of food relief, including USG-supported commodities sent to the Vanni through WFP convoys, is difficult. Only ICRC has a continuing presence in the Vanni and UN staff only have access to the Vanni as part of the food convoys that are scheduled to run weekly, but in practice move once every 10 days.

¶11. (SBU) Some sources speculated that GSL-imposed barriers to better monitoring was intended to limit the food supplied to the civilian population to survival amounts in order to expedite the exit of IDPs from the Vanni into GSL-controlled territory.

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¶12. (SBU) Ahuja visited the logistics hub for the WFP's convoys, through which 4,990 metric tons of food relief - most of it financed by the USG - had been transported to IDPs in the Vanni. Artillery fire had halted the last convoy for more than an hour on its way in from Vavuniya near the edge of what is known as "no-man's land," and staff had seen evidence of shelling along the road when they returned the next day. WFP plans to feed an IDP population of between 200,000 and 230,000 with its food relief; current limitations on monitoring distribution make it difficult to assess whether this is adequate.

¶13. (SBU) In a December 14 meeting in Colombo, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Director General for Europe, Kshenuka Senevirathna stressed to Ahuja that the government has not stepped back from its responsibilities and will take care of IDPs who are their citizens. Senevirathna reported that the government has 2-3 weeks of buffer food stocks in the Vanni and pointed to the GSL's proven ability in handling a similar situation in the East during intense fighting there as proof that the GSL is capable of managing the humanitarian situation in the North.

Working with the TMVP to Fulfill  
Its Child Soldier Commitments  
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¶14. (SBU) In a meeting with Presidential Advisor Basil Rajapaksa, Ahuja asked Rajapaksa whether he believed the TMVP will meet the requirements of the Action Plan TMVP leader Karuna signed on December 1 pledging a cessation of child recruitment and the release of those children currently serving the paramilitary organization (ref A). Rajapaksa expressed confidence that the TMVP would comply, noting that there were two approaches, one legal and the other to cut MOD financing for the TMVP camps to ensure they fulfilled their commitments. At the same time he attempted to create wiggle room for the government in the future by suggesting that some of the children on UNICEF's rolls may already have left the TMVP and thus

will not be able to be identified.

¶15. (SBU) In her meeting with Ahuja, MFA Director General Senevirathna commented that just because the TMVP has joined the political process doesn't mean the Sri Lankan government condones child soldiers. She criticized the international community for holding the GSL responsible for actions of the TMVP.

¶16. (SBU) COMMENT: We will continue to push the GSL on the need for improved humanitarian access to the North for the UN and the NGOs, a needs assessment on the ground, non-food relief items, and monitoring of relief by international organizations and NGOs. As we have pointed out to the government in public and in private, paramilitary violence and poor living conditions in IDP camps continue to act as disincentives for the Vanni's civilian population to move to government-controlled areas. We noted with interest Rajapaksa's confidence that the government had enough control over the TMVP to assure its compliance with the Action Plan signed with UNICEF. If true, we hope that the GSL will use that leverage, not only to release child soldiers but also to bring under control the systematic extra-judicial killings and forced disappearances that are associated with TMVP activity in the East. End Comment

¶17. (U) Staffdel Ahuja has cleared this cable.

Moore